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DEPARTMENT FOR PRM/ANE AND FOR NEA/ELA

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SUBJECT: JORDAN--NGOS SAY IRAQI NUMBERS DECREASING AS

REFUGEE NEEDS INCREASE

Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Representatives from seven non-governmental organizations that provide USG-funded services to Iraqis in Jordan told the Ambassador on April 5 that there were now probably about 100,000 Iraqi refugees in Jordan, not the 400,000 to 500,000 previously estimated by the GOJ. Iraqis in Jordan were becoming increasingly vulnerable as they exhaust their personal funds and tried to cope with rising expenses. NGOs said that the USG should continue to press Jordan to grant Iraqis temporary protective status, the right to work, and full access to vocational training. NGOs also asserted that the time has come for a discussion among international, Jordanian, Iraqi and U.S. officials about how to coordinate efforts that would pave the way for returns to Iraq. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Ambassador hosted the heads of the seven NGOs selected in 2008 from the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration to deliver USD 11 million in assistance to Iraqis in Jordan. The NGOs included: Save The Children, International Medical Corps, CARE International, Relief International, Center for Victims of Torture, and Mercy Corps.

Discussion of the Numbers

¶3. (C) The consensus among the NGOs was that while Jordan may have hosted many more Iraqis in the past, now there were likely about 100,000 Iraqis who would identify themselves as refugees or seek international assistance. Currently they agreed that they served a population of about 70,000 persons, including the 54,000 registered with the Jordan office of the UN High Commission for Refugees. The NGOs based their estimates of Jordan's overall Iraqi population on the results of thorough outreach programs seeking new beneficiaries for their assistance programs.

¶4. (SBU) Some NGO representatives suspected that Jordan had maintained its high estimate of the refugee population to obtain greater levels of foreign assistance. NGOs said that Jordan should allow an accurate census and assessment of needs for vulnerable Iraqis seeking assistance in Jordan. The census would likely reveal that fewer than the official 400,000-500,000 refugees currently reside in Jordan. The lower number, if made public, could relieve public anxiety about the presence of the Iraqis. The GOJ might then find it politically easier to grant the smaller number of Iraqis temporary protective status, access to legal work and vocational training.

Refugee Vulnerability on the Rise

¶5. (SBU) Even as NGOs affirmed that refugee numbers were

lower than previously estimated, they insisted that refugee vulnerability was increasing in Jordan as middle-class refugees descended into poverty and the overall economic condition in Jordan worsens parallel to global trends. Iraqis now coming forward to seek assistance are doing so once their own resources are depleted after years of living in Jordan. Some have been here since the early nineties after the first Gulf War. Medical care and education were provided for refugees free of charge. However, lodging was the largest expense for Iraqis, and refugees were working illegally to meet these costs. By some estimates, 70 percent of Iraqi families had at least one member active in the economy. Without legal status, however, refugees feared arrest and deportation should their illegal employment be discovered.

¶6. (SBU) A few Iraqis had legitimate jobs; NGOs employ dozens of Iraqi volunteers to work in partnership with the GOJ. Universities and hospitals in Jordan employed Iraqi professionals, often at a fraction of the salary they would pay similarly qualified Jordanians. Only a few, well educated Iraqis could take advantage of legal opportunities. As needs grew, unskilled Iraqis and children would increasingly turn to illegal employment, such as prostitution and other dangerous coping mechanisms to make ends meet. NGOs asked that USG use humanitarian funds to mitigate the negative effects of growing poverty, especially on one-parent families, and unaccompanied youth.

Uncertainty Undermines Repatriation

¶7. (SBU) NGO leaders agreed that repatriation was the most

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likely solution for the great majority of their Iraqi beneficiaries, however the option was not popular for many of the refugees. NGOs working with UNHCR said that only approximately 600 Iraqis availed themselves of UNHCR's assistance to repatriate in the past year. Iraqis in Jordan without visas or immigration status were hesitant to attempt repatriation because once they leave the country, Jordanian border authorities ban them from reentering the country. Given the uncertainties of Iraq, Iraqis are unwilling to make an exploratory trip home to verify conditions and to make the initial contacts with friends and family (septel). This contrasted with Syria where Iraqis were able to leave and return much more easily.

¶8. (SBU) Lack of security was still the chief reason given by refugees for remaining in Jordan. However security, as defined by the refugees, had both political and economic aspects. Refugees explained that terror attacks and kidnapping undermined economic development inside Iraq and increased joblessness, and poverty. After security, economic stability and job creation were the next most important priorities for Iraqi refugees. NGOs advised that vocational training be linked to skills Iraqis could use once they return to Iraq. However our interlocutors said that Iraqis would be in Jordan for years, and they would need to work to support their families.

Iraqi Government Involvement Needed

¶9. (SBU) Refugees complained that Iraq was not doing enough to bring them home. NGOs said that Government of Iraq delegations had carried out several uncoordinated, ineffectual missions to pitch return to specific groups, for example doctors, teachers and other professionals. However, in practice many of the enticements the GOI offered had not materialized once people returned and word had gotten back to Jordan. Based on conversations with refugees, NGOs found that the GOI could increase the likelihood of repatriation by reaching out to refugees and working with Jordan to develop programs to support Iraqis here. The NGOs would welcome

talks between Iraq and Jordan in the hopes that a dialogue might result in a strategy that could protect the refugees in Jordan while encouraging returns.

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Beecroft